

Youth in China: An Analysis of Critical Issues Through Documentary Film

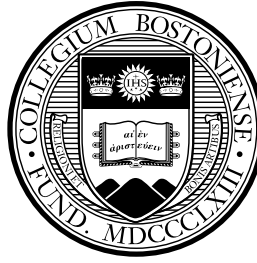
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YOUTH IN CHINA: AN ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL ISSUES THROUGH
DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Boston College
International Studies Program

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

The cultural face of modern China is constantly changing, whether through economic reforms, political campaigns, or social values. The ultimate inheritors and current carriers of this society in flux is the current post socialist, post 1989 youth generation. This paper examines the cultural changes that are occurring in China through six documentary films made in the 21st century that focus on youth and young adults as the representatives of the issues that the directors explore. In two films, the issue of the Single Child Policy will be examined in terms of the social repercussions the policy has created for modern youth, including gender, ethnic, and class inequalities. In the next two films, the economic conditions that have produced millions of migrant examined as it relates to the changing family values in much of China. The last two films explore the consumer culture of today's modern youth, and how this culture impacts the expressive output of this generation. I conclude through these films that although the youth of today have been irrevocably shaped by these, and other, cultural changes that have occurred during their lifetime, they are still most fundamentally influenced by the traditional values of Chinese culture including relationships, family, and collective expression.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Klein

For guiding me through this process with patience and wisdom, for helping me trust in my own voice, and for giving me this chance to learn and grow. This wouldn't have been possible without your inspiration and for that I'm deeply grateful.

Mom, Dad, Amelia

For encouraging and supporting my weird China obsession and for giving me the opportunity to pursue it. Thank you for all your love, it has brought me here.

Kristen

For putting up with many late nights of a glowing screen, for being my old lady stay-in buddy, and for being all that I could want and more in a roommate and friend.

Kyle

For accompanying me to too many weird movies and talking me down off of too many ledges. You kept me sane this year and here's the result, I owe you more than I can say.

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REFERENCE MAP

MAP OF PROVINCES IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



ABBREVIATIONS USED

PRC People's Republic of China

CCP..... Chinese Communist Party

PLA People's Liberation Army

Chapter One

Introduction

Overview

China, the most populous country on earth, is poised on the edge of becoming the most important global superpower in the 21st century. Its economic growth and social reforms of the past 40 years have been astounding not only in their scope but in their impact on the landscape of China today. The next generation of leadership in China will have a large hand in deciding its fate, whether it will remain stagnant in the status quo, undergo transformative reforms, or fall behind economically and politically. Those leaders, who will be called to set the course for China in this century, are now coming of age. These youths and young adults have lived their formative years in a China that was unlike any previously seen. A China that while still nominally Communist, enjoyed a flourishing market economy and unprecedented domestic consumption. A China that was hurtling towards a post-industrial era, while still demanding a massive labor force to work under unsafe and unfair conditions. A China that was becoming increasingly politically free, was still functioning under totalitarian social institutions. China's schizophrenic behavior of the past several decades will come to an end and soon, and the generation to light the path has had these inconsistencies as a part of their relationship with China since birth. How this generation views and relates to their world, the reasons behind their attitudes, and how this will play out into the future is the subject being examined in this thesis.

These questions will be answered through the examination of six documentary films made about this millennial generation. All of these documentaries have been made since the turn of the century and feature youths and young adults ages eight to twenty two as their main subjects. These films are each tackling a different aspect of life in China today, from environmental degradation, to migrant workers, to a pop culture television program, and feature children and young adults directly affected by these outside forces. However, this thesis will seek the social currents running through these documentaries, the deeper effects these social issues have had on the youth of today. For example, a film that is nominally addressing the Three Gorges Dam project might also be addressing the Single Child Policy and the ethnic and class distinctions that this policy makes, another film might be examining a girl's singing competition, while really showing the effect of consumerism on the youth of today. The multilayered narrative in each of these films is the primary source for first hand material from the youths themselves.

In studying these films, this thesis hopes to show that the social and economic programs undertaken by the government since the reform and opening period of the late 1970s have had a profound and lasting effect on the lives of Chinese today in myriad ways. Ultimately, however, it is the traditional Chinese values that have been in place for thousands of years that continue to chiefly inform and create the worldview of the Chinese youths today. Despite the influence of Communism and Westernization, China's youth is still deeply imbued with the traditional values that have made up the Chinese worldview for centuries, including relationships, hierarchical family values, longevity, and destiny. As China continues to enter the world stage, it would do best to draw on this

tradition for wisdom and guidance and not look to the West or to Communist ideology for the lead. China's problems are uniquely Chinese, China's solutions should be also.

Why Documentary?

Noted British documentarian John Grierson once said that non-fiction film is "The creative treatment of actuality". In this quotation he encapsulates the essential duality of the genre. On one hand, the main distinguishing feature of the genre is that is films reality, not what has been created on a Hollywood sound stage. At the same time, however, the non-fiction film is also the creative work of an author who has a point of view and, presumably, an agenda. The very act of choosing to film one particular situation over another is making a creative choice; the hand of the filmmaker has shaped reality even before editing, sound, and cinematography take place. In order to effectively talk about documentaries, one needs to be familiar with not only the terms used for film criticism but also the terms that make documentaries unique.

Documentary film is as old as narrative film but has charted a different course from it since the beginning. In the early stages of film prior to the first narrative feature, most of the films captured were actuality films, such as the shorts depicting a train station captured by Louis and Auguste Lumiere.¹ The term documentary wasn't coined until 1926, and was used to describe the new feature by Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, which is considered by most to be the first true documentary film.² Throughout much of

¹ Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: History of the Non-Fiction Film*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983.

² Ibid.

the rest of the 19th century, the documentary films followed in this romantic, narrative style. There was some experimentation with city symphony films and Cinéma-vérité style documentaries, but for the most part the documentary releases have followed a similar arc to their narrative counterparts.³ However, unlike the narrative films, documentaries, particularly those made in recent decades, depict true to life scenarios and capture reality in a way that narrative film is neither interested in nor capable of.

Documentary film has been chosen for this thesis because of its ability to both capture the words of the subjects as well as place them in a physical space, and allow the audience to draw their own conclusions based on the interplay between these two modes of information. Often, the image will be more important than the actual words when it comes to reading the true meaning or feeling behind them. When a subject of a book or statistic is asked a question, you are bound by their word to believe that they are speaking truly and accurately expressing their feelings. However, in documentary films, the audience can compare and contrast what is said with the images that are presented for the viewer. What the subject says might be held out by the images, or it may not be, the further information allows the viewer to analyze the information presented on two levels.

Documentary also offers an access to personal information and contact that would be unimaginable for the majority of the audience. The documentaries examined in this thesis all bring the viewer in closer to a world that they would likely not be able to even see without the help of the film. We, as viewers, are privy to the real emotional lives of others and through this connection we are able to bridge the gap in understanding. In a

³ Guynn, William. *A Cinema of Nonfiction*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc. 1990.

world that is constantly changing, especially one changing as rapidly as China, it is important to document and share the reality that is disappearing right in front of our eyes. In many Chinese cities, neighbors are there one day and gone the next, an area of the city is suddenly destroyed and a piece of history is just cut out and cut off from your mind. However, with documentary film, the places and history are forever chronicled in not only the community's memory but in film.

Chinese Documentary Film

China is a factory of stories, and there has been a rush in recent years to mine them for the viewing public in a boom of documentary features. There have been a wave of Chinese documentarians – among them Wang Bing, Zhao Liang and Huang Weikai – who are creating some of the most epic and important films being made anywhere in the world.⁴ Their documentaries have revealed some of the major social ills plaguing China today, whether the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake or the labor abuses of oil workers in the Gobi desert, they tell the untold story of China's development.

However, these films are almost entirely made underground, meaning without the consent of the Chinese government, and therefore illegally. In order to get a film made as well as to release a final film for the Chinese theaters, a director needs to seek approval from the Chinese government.⁵ So if you're making a film the government might find unpleasant or disagreeable, you won't get that approval and therefore you will not be able

⁴ Berry, Chris, Rofel, Lisa, and Xinyu, Lu. *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010

⁵ Pickowicz, Paul G. and Zhang, Yingjin. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2006.

to legally shoot or release your film within China. However, the government's attention is mainly focused on the more easily regulated narrative film industry and, for the most part, does not target documentary filmmakers. In addition to the government's lack of interest, since the introduction of digital film recording in the past few years, it is possible for a director to shoot an entire film alone, with no more equipment than a small video camera, so their access is almost unlimited. Independent filmmaking is underground and there's a whole system of production and distribution that is under the radar of the government.⁶

Unfortunately, these films often go under the radar of the larger viewing public as well. Though these films often win plaudits and prizes in international film festivals, it's hard for them to be seen by Chinese audiences. All the broadcasters are owned by the state in China and they only broadcast in-house documentaries, which are mainly propaganda or nature documentaries. There's no governmental or art funding in China so most of the documentarians have to look for investors outside of the country and screen almost exclusively to a Western film festival audience. However, the audience base is slowly getting bigger in China: white-collar workers, intellectuals, and young students in city centers like Beijing or Shanghai can join a documentary group or a small film society that will sometimes put on a low-key unofficial screening in saloons or bookstores. Although it is important to get any and all domestic viewership for the films, the majority of the people, especially those who most desperately need an outside source of information, will remain in the dark about the very existence of the alternative narrative

⁶ Ibid.

presented in these films.

A Look Ahead

This thesis consists of three main chapters, each dealing with one major social issue and discussing two films to help understand this issue. In the second chapter, the Single Child Policy's history and modern ramifications are examined through the lens of two films: *Up The Yangtze*, which chronicles the story of two teenagers who have been affected by the Three Gorges Dam project, and *Please Vote For Me*, which shows a democratic election of class monitor in a third grade classroom. The next chapter focuses on the political and economic policies that led to the current migrant worker epidemic, as seen in *Railroad of Hope* and *Last Train Home*, both of which tell the story of migrant workers travelling to and from their work. The last chapter examines the consumer culture that has erupted among Chinese youth today as well as the global influence that has spawned many of the current consumer trends; this is exhibited in *Super, Girls!*, about the 2006 female singing competition, and *Follow Your Heart*, about the underground hip-hop culture of Shanghai

Chapter Two

Single Child Policy: Regional Disparities, Gender Bias, and the Little Emperor Syndrome

Introduction

In attempt to curb its rapidly expanding population, the CCP has enforced the One Child Policy for over four decades. The policy is so pervasive, particularly in urban regions, that siblings are quickly becoming an oddity rather than a given. Those born post 2000 are not only without their own siblings but also their parents are often only children, therefore many of the youths of today have no cousins, uncles, or aunts. The typical Chinese family tree has become increasingly sparser as the single child policy enters its fifth decade and the family unit has been whittled down to just grandparents, parents, and child.

The CCP leaders argue that this drastic method of population control was a necessary measure, and, indeed, it has drastically slowed down the previously exponential population growth. However, it has also resulted in myriad social ramifications. Three of the most prominent issues created by this policy, as well as those most challenging to solve, are the enhanced distinction between urban and rural or minority children created by the policy, the gender imbalance created by the Chinese preference for sons, and the behavioral problems known commonly as “little emperor syndrome” which occurs when a single child is the sole object of attention for his or her parents and grandparents.

In this chapter, two films that deal with five children of the post-1989 generation will be examined under the lens of the single child policy and these three social issues created by this government policy. Neither of the films, *Please Vote For Me* and *Up The Yangtze*, addresses the single child policy directly but the undercurrent is running throughout and dictates the lives and attitudes of the five main characters. Indeed, these films were selected because the ramifications of the single child policy on society are most clear when they're not explicitly stated. To ask a little emperor what he thinks about the phenomenon is not nearly as illuminating as watching a little emperor in his first job or participate in student elections.

The filmmakers have a different agenda in both of these films: one is to chronicle the multilevel impact of a major public works project, the second is to perform a democracy experiment on a group of young students, but through their edits it is clear that both directors are drawn to the behavioral and societal problems that are shaping the lives of their subjects, almost all of which can be traced back to impacts of the one child policy. How the single child policy and these effects have impacted the worldview of the youths portrayed is another key issue, and in many cases the single child policy has served to enhance many of the social inequalities that have pervaded China for millennia.

Before addressing the films, however, the history of the single child policy must be more closely examined to fully comprehend the reasons it was created and the social atmosphere it has instilled in modern China.

History of the Single Child Policy

China is the most populous nation in the world; with over 1.3 billion people, it towers over other global super powers such as the United States, which has a population of only a little more than 300 million. The Chinese government presides over one out of every five people on the planet. That amount of power and responsibility dictates what issues the government, and behind it the CCP, will give precedence in their agenda and which will remain a secondary priority. Over its 60 years of existence, the government has shown that it is more concerned with providing the basic human necessities of food, housing, and medical care before addressing other concerns, such as human rights and social unrest. To ensure that the country would be able to provide a basic living standard for its billions of citizens into the future, the government implemented a family planning policy in 1979. The enforcement of this policy has waxed and waned, and has generally been focused on specific urban areas rather than the entire country, which is, in large part, rural farmland.

The one child policy has had very few, and mostly minor alterations, since its initial inception over forty years ago: each married couple of child-bearing age is limited to only one child, and the state closely monitors and controls who can conceive in a given year.¹ In contrast, the countryside, where about 53% of China's population lives, contains three variants of the one-child policy. In the coastal provinces about 40% of couples are

¹ White, Tyrene. *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning in the People's Republic 1949-2005*. London: Cornell University Press, 2006. 2

permitted a second child if their first child was female. In central and southern provinces everyone is permitted a second child either if the first is a girl or if the parents suffer “hardship”, a criterion determined by local officials. In the far west and Inner Mongolia, the provinces do not operate a one-child policy at all.² Another exception to this policy is the exclusion of any minority groups from any birth planning campaign, particularly those in volatile regions, such as Tibet or Xinjiang.³

The history of birth planning in China since the People’s Republic’s was founded in 1949 has been marked by many fluctuations in policy. In the volatile political years between 1949 and 1979, in short the years under Chairman Mao Zedong, the government alternately encouraged and discouraged larger families.⁴ These fluctuations in the government’s attitude towards birth planning during Mao’s time in power accounted for the drastic fluctuations in the population between the period that the People’s Republic was formed and the end of Mao’s life. However, despite the industrialization, violence, famines, and campaigns of various successes, population predictions demonstrated that China’s population would continue to grow exponentially if each woman was allowed to have two children.⁵ The CCP could see that the only long lasting solution would involve drastic measures. Mao’s death in 1976 opened the possibility for his successor to move

² Xue, Xinran. “The Worldwide War on Baby Girls.” *The Economist*, May 4, 2010.

³ Saith, Ashwani. “Economic Incentives for the One child Family in Rural China.” *The China Quarterly*, No. 87 (Sep. 1981) 496.

⁴ Fitzpatrick

⁵ Aird, John S. *Slaughter of the Innocents: Coercive Birth Control in China*. Washington D.C.: The AEI Press. 1990. 28

away from the Chairman's extreme Marxist/Leninist view of population, which focused on the manpower of population rather than the practical matter of being able to provide for the citizens that make up the powerful nation.

The period surrounding Deng Xiaoping's rise to power marked a time of radical political and economic reforms that would shape the way the government as well as the people would understand birth planning.⁶ The one-child policy was first proposed in 1978 and was officially adopted in September 1980 when Deng was poised to claim power. Deng openly supported the policy saying that birth planning, and specifically the one child policy, was of "major importance for the national economy."⁷ The policy had almost universal support because of the positive economic slant that Deng had applied to the importance of population control and after years of chaos surrounding mostly unchecked population growth, a government showing concern for the issue was drastically preferred.

Today, the goals of reducing population growth have been met and the one child policy proved to be the only overwhelmingly successful method of slowing population growth. In 1949 the fertility rate was 6.14 children per family, by 1979 it had fallen to 2.75 but by 2003, after 20 years of the one child policy, the rate had dropped to as low as 1.4 children per household.⁸ In part, because of this slow down of the population, the nation has risen beyond all expectations in world standing, both politically and

⁶ White, 61

⁷ Scharping, 54

⁸ White, 43- 45

economically. However, the social repercussions of the policy, less quantifiable but none the less tangible, are becoming an increasing burden upon the Chinese people and government, three of which will now be explicated through the following two films.

Contrasting Characters in *Up The Yangzte*

Up The Yangzte was a 2007 film directed by Yung Chung and chronicles the final stages of the completion of the Three Gorges Dam Project, a massive hydro-electrical undertaking that would flood a large section of the Yangtze River and surrounding land. Although such a literally massive topic could have been framed cinematically in any number of ways, Chung decided to illustrate this moment in Chinese history as seen through the experiences of two teenagers living in Hubei province.

After it's initial universal application, the one-child policy was scaled back to take into account the vastly dissimilar amounts of population growth in different areas of the country and outside of the Han majority ethnic group. As the population began to move in droves to the coastal cities and provinces, the population control efforts there became stricter while those in the relatively sparsely populated countryside could become laxer. Often, the areas that became less densely populated were also areas that were largely inhabited by non-Han ethnic groups, particularly the far western provinces such as Tibet or Xinjiang. In these two cases, the one-child policy has been all but discarded in order to preserve the 55 other ethnic minorities as well as to ensure a semblance of balance between coastal cities and interior provinces, demographically. In the film, *Up the*

Yangzte, one of each type of child is portrayed: a girl from a rural area with ethnic minority status and a Han boy from a smaller urban setting on the Yangzte River.

Shui Yu is the 16-year-old daughter of farmers who have been displaced from their home by the rising tides and have been temporarily living in a shack on the banks of the river, which will inevitably be washed away as well. Bo Yu 'Jerry' Chen is a 19 year old high school graduate who is the only son of a middle class family. These two cross paths when they both join the crew of one of the Yangtze river cruises that cater to Western tourists, Shui Yu in order to support her family and finance her brother's future education, Jerry Chen in order to earn more spending money to finance his nighttime exploits with friends. The film closely follows their struggles on shipboard, as well as Shui Yu's parents' preparations for the flood. Although Chung's stated purpose in the documentary is the chronicle the demise of his ancestral home, the banks of the Yangtze River, the storyline as it follows the two teenagers is drawn more and more into their struggles with the burdens of expectations placed on them by their parents, one as financial supporter and the other as object of affection.

Shui Yu is not a single child: as part of a minority group as well as a resident of a rural part of the province, her parents were able to have another child after giving birth to a daughter. Oftentimes, local governments will encourage rural farmers to try for a son if their first child is female, to ensure that the agricultural sector continues production.⁹ However, the Shui family, who are given this special status, are ironically in no position to care for two children, while many who are denied more than one child in the cities

⁹ Economy, Elizabeth C. *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. 126.

would be in a better position, financially, to provide for two children. Although it is clear that Shui Yu's parents love and have cared for her as best they can, the rising river and diminishing crop land have forced them to concede to the traditional notion that a child, particularly a female, is a burden until they are able to support their parents. When we enter the Shui family's story, it is at the moment when the oldest child will begin to pay back her parents for the sacrifices they have made in order to raise her.

Shui Yu is asked by her parents to give up her education in order to earn extra money for the family. Their explanation for this sacrifice is that as rural farmers, her parents lack the skills necessary to support the family on their own. Mother Shui says: "I know it's because your father and I don't have the skills that we have to exploit you. If we had a choice, how could we do this to you?" Although Shui Yu has been shown to excel at school, making it all the way to the high school level, she is expected by her parents to stop her studies not only to support them but more importantly to support her brother, who will continue on in his studies. If Shui Yu had been an only child, the changes in the situation are difficult to predict. Perhaps her parents would still force her to leave school to work because of their dire situation brought about by the rising river. Or, because their resources wouldn't have been stretched between two children, she might have been able to continue school and perhaps continue her education to the next level, although her parents' ability to afford a university education is doubtful. The possible outcomes of Shui Yu's life as a single child are unknown, but the cause of her dilemma are: because of their economic situation her family is unable to support two children, but because of their rural status, they were prompted to by an economically

interested government: one of the many double binds that characterize much of the CCP's social policies.

Shui Yu accepts her parents' demands and her job on the cruise ship is entirely for the sake of her family: we see her dutifully sending her earnings home, expressing concern for the well being of her parents, and hopes that her money can help them. One child in this family was put upon to become socially and economically superior to her parents; to leave the house in order to raise the level of the rest of their family, particularly her brother who will likely now become the sole focus of his parents' attention and hopes for an educated child. Shui Yu has become a second child in a world that only has room for only children, and this separates her physically from her family and from her parents' expectations. This is beautifully illustrated in the film in the scene when her parents depart from visiting her and are taken down in a funicular while Shui Yu stands on the platform above them, creating a visual for the separation occurring between them, both physically and socially.

Shui Yu's parents are adamant that she leave school and begin earning money so that she can support her younger brother in achieving a higher level of education than she could attain, the implication being that if one child is to receive education, it is naturally to be the boy. When this news is imparted to Shui Yu, her reaction is one of her only outburst of the entire film: upturning her food bowl and storming off. The injustice of the inequality that is befalling her is felt in her act of defiance but moments later the camera

shows her anger transforming into a bitter acceptance. This partiality shown to their son could be due to the Chinese cultural preference given to sons.

Marriage, family, and male offspring are all deeply rooted cultural concepts in the Chinese society's psyche and in order to successfully control the amount of births in Chinese families, the government had to actively fight against and suppress thousand year old traditions. The one child policy is the most dangerous form of population control, in the regard to gender demographics and equality, because when limiting a Chinese family to one child, the overwhelming majority of parents will try to ensure that their child is male. This is because in traditional Chinese society, a female child was seen as little more than a burden to her family and a son was preferred. This traditional thinking is best described in the ancient "Book of Songs" (1000-700 B.C.):

*When a son is born,
Let him sleep on the bed,
Clothe him with fine clothes,
And give him jade to play...
When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give broken tiles to play...*¹⁰

While growing up, a daughter was unable to be as useful as her brothers because of the systems of the home environment, where all interactions are based on Confucian

¹⁰ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 161.

hierarchical relationships.¹¹ Sons could help their fathers tend the fields, while daughters could only assist their mothers in household tasks.¹² Once the daughter became of age, she would marry and leave to live with her husband in his family home.¹³ The duty to care for the parents and grandparents in their old age fell to the sons, who would remain in his family home after marriage. Given these circumstances, it becomes clearer why the preference for sons has remained so firmly rooted in the Chinese culture.¹⁴ The one child policy was implemented in 1978 however, not 1878. Many of the distinctions between sons and daughters have been made obsolete by modern society. The preference for sons remained because of cultural stereotypes that have proved difficult to overcome.

The stark contrast to Shui Yu is Bo Yu “Jerry” Chen, the only child of a Han family from the nearby urban center. As both a man and an urban citizen, he has been entitled to many more opportunities than Shui Yu. The reasons for Jerry to take up a job have nothing to do with family sacrifice or his parents’ hopes for a brighter future for their offspring. Instead, he is bored with school and wants to earn his own money, which he is not in any way lacking from his parents. This is the irony created by the single child policy: the upwardly mobile and middle class children of those living in cities become the sole direction of their parents resources, whereas those living on the margins of society in

¹¹ Goldin, Paul Rakita. “The View of Women in Early Confucianism.” ed. by Li, Chenyang in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics and Gender*. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2000. 143.

¹² Mann, Susan. “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in the Mid-Qing Period.” *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: a Reader*. Ed. by Brownell, Susan and Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. Berkley, CA: University of California Press. (2002) 98.

¹³ Gunde, Richard. *Culture and Customs of China*. Westwood, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. (2002) 168.

¹⁴ White, 113

rural areas or ethnic enclaves are burdened with the government encouragement to have more than one child and further stretch their already lacking resources.

Bo Yu Chen also exemplifies another social side effect of the one child policy, the so-called “little emperor” syndrome. Many are concerned about the rise of these “little emperors” or children who, growing up without any distraction from siblings, have the sole focus of six adults (parents and grandparents) and become spoiled by all of this attention.¹⁵ With one child, incomes are channeled into buying better health care and education for their sole son or daughter and providing the most desirable brand name toys and clothes available.¹⁶ The cruise director, Campbell Ping He, even directly mentions this phenomenon found among his employees. “Most of them are single child in the family. They are like an apple in their mother’s eyes. So in my opinion, they are spoiled. They’re kind of self-centered. They don’t know how to care for the others but here they need to learn.”

It becomes immediately apparent that although Jerry is in love with the idea of making money, he is hopelessly incapable of toning down his arrogant and self-entitled disposition to adequately perform the humble role of cruise ship waiter and porter. After he is dismissed because of complaints of laziness and grubbing for tips, Jerry remains unaffected by this reprimand and secure in his future prospects. In his interview with director Yung Chung, he simultaneously explains the difference between himself and the rural, female Shui Yu, and shows a shocking level of awareness of his own entitlement:

¹⁵ Choi, Ching Y and Kane, Penny

¹⁶ Xue

Jerry Chen: “I don’t think I’m suited for this job. I’m very arrogant, I look down on everything. I think I was born with a silver spoon.”

Yung Chung: “What will happen in your future?”

Jerry Chen: “My parents will take care of me in the future. I’m very young. I’m 19 years old. This is their responsibility.”

Yung Chung: “Shui Yu is only 16”

Jerry Chen: “We’re different. I come from a richer family. I can continue my studies, how can she do that? How can her parents support her? Well, my family can.”

Chung also takes care to distinguish between these two visually, particularly contrasting their background when we are first introduced to them. As the camera sweeps over Shui’s family home on the banks of the river, lingering over the chickens pecking around inside and the water dripping through the cracks in the roof, he overlays Shui Yu describing how her family is lucky to have a home and good food to eat. Her thankfulness and dutifulness to her family is not wrapped up in her material possessions, she is grateful for everything she has. When we’re introduced to Chen Yu Bo, he’s lounging and smoking, forcing his friends to join him in a shot of Absolut Vodka in a sleek KTV or karaoke lounge, bemoaning his lack of money and talking down to his friends who are continuing their education. The contrast between these two scenes, particularly the images and not the dialogue, says more than Chung’s narration could ever explain.

When the two enter the ship, they become connected in their journey and the contrast between them is now evaluated not only by the viewer but also by their peers and coworkers. Another indication of this contrast is the roles they’re assigned in their new

jobs. The rural and urban bias manifests itself in the staff's expectations of them as well as in the work they're given. Chung uses parallel scenes to both connect and distinguish Jerry and Shui Yu: while he is greeting tourists at the front of the ship, Shui Yu is elbow deep in dirty dish water below deck; while Shui Yu dutifully writes home to her parents in bed, Jerry is sneaking into the girl's cabin in his silk pajamas. However, the expectations of their abilities begins to shift as their true personalities break out of their stereotypes: we see more and more scenes of Shui Yu being embraced by her co-workers, often literally leading her by the hand to help her adjust to this new life. This is complimented by more and more shots of Jerry sitting alone and brooding, finally leading to him broodingly stalking off the ship after having been fired. The urban bias that had shaped their birth selection from the government is necessarily continued through their lives, but thankfully their true personality is eventually able to break through the stereotypes. Shui Yu proves herself to be a hard working and humble young woman, while Jerry proves himself to be a self-centered single child, or 'little emperor'.

The characters shown in this film have undoubtedly been shaped by decisions made before their birth: only child versus oldest child, urban vs. rural, Han majority vs. Ethnic minority, but their outcomes are determined by their own agency. The one who has every advantage is the one who ultimately loses, while the one who is on the lowest rung of the social ladder is able to rise above her situation and improve her lot in life. Perhaps this is due to individual temperament but it is equally likely that the very circumstances that have separated the two have been the factors that have shaped their personalities the

most. At the end of the film, the viewer is left with the feeling that Shui Yu has benefited more from her adversities than Jerry Chen has from his privilege.

Future Social Ills Predicted in *Please Vote for Me*

Please Vote for Me is another 2007 documentary, directed by Chinese national and Wuhan native Weijin Chen. The film was part of the BBC produced “Why Democracy” Series, which produced ten hour-long documentary features from over the globe featuring different aspects of contemporary democracy. The films were broadcast in over 48 countries in October 2007, by PBS in the United States and BBC in the U.K, but were not broadcast in Mainland China because of the sensitive nature of the subject.¹⁷ *Please Vote For Me* is the documentation of a democracy experiment Chen conducted in a third grade classroom in the city of Wuhan: for the first time, the students and not the teachers will select their own Class Monitor.¹⁸ In China, the national elections take place only within the members of the Communist party and many of the top leaders are merely appointed and not elected, so to the children in Wuhan, free elections are a completely foreign process.¹⁹

Despite the ostensible topic in this film being the meaning of democracy in China, the theme of single child pervasive throughout the narrative as with *Up the Yangzte*. The three main characters all eight year old only children and the film spends as much time, if not more, focusing on their relationship with their parents, their home life, and their

¹⁷ Why Democracy Project. “Who is involved.” <http://www.whymocracy.net/project/who-is-involved>. Accessed February 21, 2012.

¹⁸ Please Vote for Me Film. “About.” <http://pleasevoteforme.org/about.html>. Accessed February 21, 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid., Lieberthal, Kenneth. *Governing China: From Revolution to Reform*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. 173.

attitudes and relationships with each other, than on their thoughts on Democracy. The three children are Luo Lei, the son of the head of the police department and a policewoman, Cheng Cheng, the son of a divorced television producer and stepson of an engineer, and Xu Xiaofei, the daughter of a single-mother school administrator. The social position of their parents also plays a key role in determining not only how they're treated, but also, possibly, the outcome of the election. Although these students' only-child status is certainly not unique, the close scrutiny given to their families draws our attention to this aspect of their character.

Only children often have a stigma attached to them, especially in Western countries, where only children are an extreme minority of the demographic makeup of families. Many trace the association of only children with particular behavioral problems to an 1898 study, when the psychologist E. W. Bohannon undertook a study of "peculiar" children and concluded that only children were problematic.²⁰ In 1906, Eugen Neter, a German pediatrician, published a clinical study that supported Bohannon's conclusion.²¹ The psychologist G. Stanley Hall went so far as to make the famous declaration that "being an only child is a disease in itself."²²

As no one had studied only children in China before the one-child policy, Chinese scholars chose to follow the example of their Western colleagues and started by testing whether only children were "spoiled brats."²³ Even the stereotypical terms for Chinese

²⁰ Caihong Wei. "The myth of 'Little Emperors'." *Guanxi: The China Letter* 2.5 (2007): 12+. *General OneFile*. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.

²¹ Wei, "The Myth of Little Emperors."

²² Ibid.

²³ Shen, Jianping, and Bao-Jane Yuan. "Moral values of only and sibling children in mainland China." *The Journal of Psychology* 133.1: 115.

only children came from the U.S. media: "Little Emperor," the most widely used term for Chinese only children in the 1980s, originated in a Newsweek article titled "A Rash of 'Little Emperors.'"²⁴ This article was translated and published in the popular Chinese newspaper Workers Daily 11 days later and introduced the term to the national psyche, from then on, terms like "little emperor," "little sun," and "little princess" were commonly applied to only children in China.

The root in this phenomenon may lie with the Chinese focus on the family, particularly the success of younger generations. Traditionally, the Chinese value big families.²⁵ Older members, parents and grandparents, usually live with or near their children and grandchildren; this is considered not only the duty of the children but also the logical life cycle of the family.²⁶ Since the introduction of the Single Child Policy, however, the younger generations have been dwindled down to single son or daughter. Chinese educators have warned that the defining characteristics of families with "little emperors" is the "4-2-1 syndrome," meaning four grandparents and two parents pampering one child.²⁷ Also, unlike many only-children in the West, Chinese only children are mostly from intact families and are healthy physically because Chinese parents often terminate a pregnancy if the fetus is found to have problems; the problems these children are likely to face involve the changing Chinese family values, the education system, and Chinese society.²⁸ In the film, the little emperor syndrome

²⁴ "A Rash of 'Little Emperors.'" Newsweek. 13 March 1985.

²⁵ Ivanhoe, Philip J. and Van Norden, Bryan W. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Inc, 2001. 43.

²⁶ Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 35.

²⁷ Wei, "The Myth of Little Emperors."

²⁸ Aird, 28.

manifests itself as cronyism and aggression when confronted with the new concept of being judged by your peers.

It is almost impossible to determine what would be normal single child to parent behavior given no frame of reference for normal, but there are several key scenes that indicate a level of involvement and participation in a child's life that is above the average and seems to be encouraging bad behavior. Cheng Cheng is presented as the most pampered of all the three, as a chubby boy he is the stereotypical image of the overly coddled Chinese child (which has been associated with a growing number of adolescent obesity cases). He demands his parents write his homework for him, give him special advice for the election, and is prone to throwing temper tantrums when not given his immediate way. His reasons for wanting to be class monitor, at least those given in private to the camera and his parents, also ring true to the need for control that little emperors often display. He wants to be able to "boss people around" and "get to do what you want": this is clearly the treatment he's become used to at home and therefore expects to be given to him in every instance in his life. The scene that clearly made the editing process solely for the purpose of depicting Cheng Cheng as a "little emperor" was when his stepfather assists him in wiping himself after using the bathroom. This ten-second scene resonates deeply as an almost cartoonish image of indulgence and coddling.

Cheng Cheng's tactics in the election also directly stem from his parents over indulgence at home: instead of preparing a speech and a talent, he instead enlists his friends to sabotage his opponents by shouting and jeering during their speeches. But why would Cheng Cheng think that something should be achieved through hard work and

care? He's never been taught that. Before the election begins we see him watching TV and lazing around on the couch in his underwear, while his mother finishes and corrects his homework assignments. Instead of preparing an instrument or dance for his talent piece, like his competitors, he only manages to barely memorize a pop song but is met with the most cheers from the audience: he knows how to work a crowd, at least. Later, when the speech that his parents have written for him to give during the debate proves too long to memorize, he throws a tantrum until his mother rewrites it.

The entitlement and selfishness that Cheng Cheng displays both at home and in school is seemingly reprehensible to the audience, but his efforts are rewarded with a second place finish in the election, beating the earnest Xu Xiaofei. This pattern of approval and rewards for his bad behavior will likely carry out through the rest of his life either through his willingness to exploits his family connections or through his uncanny comprehension of how to underhandedly get what you want through intimidation and bribery, a problem that manifests itself in the corruption that plagues much of China's business and government realm. A key aspect of this favoritism is never captured on film but was revealed by the director in an interview: Cheng Cheng was only selected to run for the Class Monitor position because his mother, the television producer, is a colleague of the director Chen and therefore helped him secure the approval of the school to film.²⁹ In return for her help, her son is to be featured prominently in the film and is awarded with a higher status in the class than his performance warrants. These quid pro quo bargains occur at every level of Chinese society, an important aspect of the concept of

²⁹ Independent Lens. "Making Of." <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/pleasevoteforme/makingof.html>. Accessed February 21, 2012.

guanxi or relationships, which dictates that one can only rise in business or social standing through mutually beneficial connections.

The eventual winner of the Class Monitor election, by a wide margin, is Luo Lei, the son of the local police chief. Luo Lei had been selected by his teachers to be class monitor for the previous two years and seems confident about his chances for a reelection, but is more willing than Cheng Cheng to put the necessary work into gaining his classmates votes. During the first half of the film, Luo Lei repeatedly turns down his parents offer to help him with the election, preferring to “rely on his own strength.” In sharp contrast to Cheng Cheng, he says “I don’t want to control others, they should rely on themselves” in response to his parents insistence that he use tricks to get votes. To reinforce his independence, after a sequence of shots of children being carried into the elementary school by their parents during a rainy day, we see Luo Lei walking next to his father, squirming away from his protective hand in order to stride in confidently.

Luo Lei’s parents are different from Cheng Chungs’; theirs is not blind encouragement but exacting and high standards that he must achieve. Perhaps because of their high social status they expect more from their son, but they are still more than willing to step in and help him achieve it. This channeling of all the energy into the one child is what is troublesome to many about the trend of “little emperors”: the parents of these only children are doing them no favors by protecting them from reality and spoiling them rotten. Indeed, when their own future support will likely depend on the successes of

the children, it would be in their own interest to ensure that the child is equipped with the necessary skills to succeed on their own. However, Luo Lei initially seems to want to be genuinely chosen by his peers, and at first works hard to impress them with his speech and flute performance. His contrast to Cheng Cheng is enhanced when he breaks down in tears and apologizes to Xiaofei for joining in mocking her with Cheng Cheng, his apology sincere while Cheng Cheng's is shown as self-serving.

However, his sincere attitude begins to shift when he sees how successful the competition have been, particularly Cheng Cheng. So, he begins to take a page out his book by adding a pop song to his traditional flute melody. But his is not the easy confidence of Cheng Cheng, he is more comfortable when he is in the position of power and able to exert his authority. He realizes that if he is going to beat Cheng Cheng, he'll have to fight dirty too: His parents orchestrate a trip for his class on the monorail around Wuhan, he later uses his father's advice about how to trick Cheng Cheng in the debate, and finally turns to straight bribery when he pass out Autumn Moon festival gifts to his classmates immediately before they vote. Whether his initial resolve to allow his peers to choose for themselves was just a front said for the benefit of the camera, or if he really meant it but was forced to use these tactics is unclear, but it is telling how quickly even the seemingly sincere Luo Lei sacrifices his ideals to win. As the little emperor generation ages, it seems clear that the lowest common denominator in terms of ethics will necessarily drag down all others.

The future of China likely rests on people like Cheng Cheng and Luo Lei, the corrupt official or the iron fisted military ranker; both have been struggling for power among the top ranks of the government for decades and, if the behavior of the little emperors is any indication, that fight will continue. A scene that exhibits this power struggle between these two boys not only satirizes it but forces the viewer to realize how easily democratic contests can devolve into petty power struggles, occurs immediately before the two boys' debate. They stand side by side at a urinal, underhandedly criticizing the other's style or chances and this macho debate gets decided as so many do: with an arm wrestling contest. The image of two young boys, one hand directing the flow of urine, the other busy wrestling across the urinal, lingers and seems to sum up perfectly the power dynamics between the privileged in China.

The last contestant, overlooked not only by this paper until now but also by her male peers in the election, is Xu Xiaofei. Her mother laments her daughter's less privileged position in comparison with her male candidate counterparts. Both these other boys are the only children of reasonably well off and well connected parents, who dote on their sons. Xu Xiaofei's mother, however, is single and is only a lower level administrator at the school; she does not have the resources to offer the kind of help to Xiaofei that the other candidates are receiving. The underlying current, especially in the accusations that Xiaofei is a crybaby, is that a female candidate is not suited for this position of power and certainly won't be able to beat her male competitors for the

position. Arguably, Xu Xiaofei is the most qualified candidate, she does not have the crony-ish tendencies of Cheng Cheng or the aggressive attitude of Luo Lei, but even she seems aware that she won't be the candidate chosen. The patriarchy that dominated ancient China is still very much in effect today, and this can be seen not only through the selective birth of sons but also through the opportunities that those sons are afforded that is yet to come to the daughters.

The outcome of the elections is suspiciously exactly along the lines of privilege that each child has: Luo Lei, the son of a high-ranking official in the city, wins in a landslide. Cheng Cheng, who although is the child of divorce, is still being raised by two parents with mid-level jobs, claims second place. But Xiaofei, the child of a single mother who is a low level education official, is almost completely left behind, a turn of events that will likely be similar to the opportunities she is afforded in the rest of her life. This election, democratic though it was, showed the same results as if the winner had been selected, so why did these students choose it? The simplest explanation is that Luo Lei was the class monitor last year and the students merely voted for the status quo. If this is so, it's less troubling than the thought that eight year olds are discriminating based on class background and gender, but it indicates that this generation of little emperors is not interested in radical reform or change, they'd rather be gossiping or watching TV.

Conclusion

The Single Child Policy was not the only factor that shaped the lives of the five main characters in the two films, but it has served to exacerbate and accentuate issues that would have presented challenges under normal circumstances. To introduce a completely artificial social constraint to a society plagued with more than enough naturally manifested problems, such as prejudice, corruption, and poverty, is sure to have disastrous effects on those who are already at risk. The effect of perpetuating these issues will also lead to a harder road for any democratic or social reforms that are hoped for in China. *Up The Yangtze* paints a more optimistic image of the future than *Please Vote For Me*, in that the more deserving character is rewarded for her hard work and fortitude. But in the end, the Jerry Chens and Cheng Chengs of the world will remain holding the upper hand, they will continue to be freely given much more than the Shui Yus and Xu Xiaofeis have to work hard to achieve.

What does this say about the future of China? If those who have never learned the necessary skills to earn their positions are rewarded with power automatically, then the country will remain stagnate. Ancient China has often been lauded as one of the only true meritocracies in the Imperial age: although there was a dynastic Emperor in the throne, those with the real power were the bureaucrats who had to pass grueling examinations before being awarded with a position in the Imperial government. These positions could be won by any (male) subject, regardless of his background, and were not hereditary. If

China truly wants to be a global force in the future, it will need to return to this classical value and abandon its corrupt system of rewarding those who have the most connections. Although the One Child Policy could be a useful form of curbing population growth, the Chinese government will need to address the social issues that cause the inequality stemming from it if they want it to solve more problems than it causes.

Chapter Three

Migrant Workers: Future Expectations and Changing Family Values

Introduction

In China's changing economic landscape, much of the burden of advancing society has been borne by the millions of factory and seasonal farm laborers who travel thousands of miles from their home to obtain jobs that will allow them to save for the future. Since the opening of the economy by Deng Xiaoping but particularly since the late 1990s, there has been an enormous increase not only in China's GDP but in the amount of labor required to maintain this ballooning economy. Land workers from rural provinces, such as Sichuan in the south and the Henan/Hubei region, have left their ancestral villages, where there is no longer enough farming labor to sustain families, and headed to the enormous factories of Guangzhou and Shenzhen or the expansive fields of northern Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. The profound influence this separation has not only on the workers themselves but also on their children and families is one of the most critical social issues facing China today.

Unlike the films discussed in the last chapter, both of these films deal directly with the question of migrant workers and offer the perspective of the workers speaking openly about their situation. Like mismatched bookends, *Last Train Home* and *Railroad of Hope* show two very different perspectives on the life of the migrant worker but all rotate around the theme of travelling by rail to a job to better your life. *Railroad of Hope* shows the initial journey for many enthusiastic young people, about to become laborers in

the cotton fields of the Northwest, while *Last Train Home* shows the opposite story, with the worn out garment factory workers making the return journey to their hometown for their brief New Year's break.

It would be difficult not to read these two films as the beginning and ending of a tragic story, of cock-eyed optimism in one turned into hardened and bitter reality in the next. However, I will argue that the most prominent theme that can be extracted from both of these films is the improvement, over time, of conditions for the next generation; that the prosperity of one's children is the ultimate goal for these workers. In *Railroad of Hope*, which chronicles the late 90s and early 2000s expansion of migrant workers, the ability to leave the countryside in search of work was the end goal for these young adults. Ten years later, in *Last Train Home*, the goal is for the children of the workers from the 90s to not have to follow in their footsteps, to be able to support your children's studies so they can leave the village but to attend university, not to join the factory. Although the reality of this sacrifice is often difficult to conceive, these two films are part of the narrative of the ongoing development and its effect on the rural population of future generations. The medium of film is key in conveying both the enormity of this movement, as well as the personalization of it, focusing on individuals' stories in a way that statistics in a census report would never be able to.

Another aspect to consider in analyzing the cultural and political message behind these films is the director's point of view and the audience the film is made and marketed for; in the case of these films it was generally a European/American film festival

audience. Since the vast majority of the subjects of this film would not be part of the audience who would be seeing the final product, the question of the end goal of the film should be foremost in the minds of the viewer: why and for whom were the directors telling this story? If they were hoping to market them to Europeans and Americans, what was the intended response from the audience? These questions will be answered both through the directors' own words (through interviews given during the films' release) as well as reading their intentions within the films. The role of the director is markedly distinct in the production of each of these films but their stated goal overlap on a key issue: to educate the Western consumers of the goods produced by these laborers and hopefully to inspire them to protest the conditions under which their products are made and the lives lead by the workers who make them. The focus on a family in *Last Train Home* and the emotionally charged questions of *Railroad of Hope* both achieve an empathetic reaction from the audience and perhaps this is the tactic that the director hopes will drive the audience to action, or at least to seek more knowledge.

Before exploring these issues within the films themselves, it is necessary to first understand how this culture of the migrant worker or "floating population" was allowed to emerge and what are the economic and political realities of these workers today.

History and Demographics of Chinese Migrant Workers

As with many social and economic issues facing modern China, the causes of the massive internal migration are complex and numerous. In addition to the general

complications surrounding the history of Chinese migrant workers, obtaining reliable and up to date statistics about the workers is difficult owing to the CCP's reluctance to release their census data as well as the probability that the data released is an extremely low estimate of the actual number. According to the official Chinese news agency *Xinhua* reporting on a report issued in January of 2012 by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of people not living in the places of their registered residence for more than six months last year was 271 million, up 9.77 million from 2010.¹

This number is likely not entirely accurate. An outside report by Kam Wing Chan of the University of Washington has compiled statistics which show that in 2005, the most recent period for which reliable statistics are available, there was a gross migration of about 230 million Chinese spending most of the year away from their home town or village. He also forecasts another 100 million rural residents could move to cities by 2020.² If the number was 230 million in 2005, then with the exponential increase expected by 2020, 270 is an extremely low estimate for the 2011 statistic. However, knowing the numbers does not help to understand the factors that have caused this massive amount of people, almost equivalent with the entire population of the United States, to leave their homes for the better part of a year. For this answer, the history of rural life in China as well as the massive changes brought about by the various leaders of the PRC, is necessary.

¹ "China sees increase in internal migration in 2011 - report." *BBC Monitoring International Reports* 19 Jan. 2012.

² "We like to move it move it; The impact of Chinese migration." *The Economist*. 25 Feb. 2012: 54.

For the vast majority of its 5000-year history, China had a primarily rural population and was almost entirely an agricultural economy. Not until very recently, meaning the first half of the 20th century, was any significant part of China industrialized or urban. With millions of acres of tillable land in the central provinces, and each area ideal for harvesting a different crop, the majority of the population worked on the land, providing food for themselves as well as their local markets.³ Internal migration before the Communist Revolution was almost impossible: the extreme few who were able to leave their home village were those who had passed the grueling imperial examination and were therefore granted a bureaucratic post either in their provincial capital or the imperial capital in Beijing.⁴ With the Republican Revolution in 1911, there was an increase in movement to cities, particularly towards the treaty ports of Shanghai and Hong Kong because of their modern imports from the Western countries that colonized them, but this again was an extremely small percentage of people. The vast majority still relied on subsistence farming as a means of support and was tied to the land.⁵

After the Communist Revolution in 1949, the CCP began to crack down on the chaotic movements that had occurred over the previous decade of war. Beginning in 1952, there were several measures designed to prevent internal migration to cities, which

³ Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1999. 427

⁴ Ibid. 572

⁵ Ibid. 663

culminated in the establishment of the Hukou system in 1958.⁶ A Hukou is a residency permit based on family register system and controls where citizens are legally permitted to live.⁷ Although the central authority of the CCP claimed that this was a measure to ensure the stability of the new nation, it mainly functioned as an instrument of the command economy: the government could directly control the placement of the labor force and could therefore ensure an adequate supply of rural laborers for the many state-owned businesses.⁸ Those who did not register their household were denied grain rations, employee housing, health care, or, in some cases, access to education and marriage permits.⁹ Adherence to this system was strictly enforced until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and punishment for those who were found outside of their designated region could be expulsion from the cities or placement in detention centers.¹⁰

After Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1980 and his sweeping economic reforms of the next decade, the enforcement of the Hukou system became increasingly laxer. Many could now unofficially migrate and get a job without a valid permit. Although Deng had made agricultural reforms in the countryside, the wealth flowing into the coastal cities created pressures that encouraged migration from the interior. This new economy also provided incentives for officials not to enforce regulations on migration; the laborers

⁶ Hussain, Arthar and Wang, Youjuan. "Rural- Urban Migration in China: Scale, Composition, Pattern, and Deprivation." *Marginalization in Urban China: Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Webster, Chris and Wu, Fulong. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010. 133 – 153

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Zheng, Tiantian. "Performing Media-Constructed Images for First-Class Citizenship: Political Struggles of Rural Migrant Hostesses in Dalian." *Media, Identity, and Struggle in Twenty-First-Century China*. Ed. Fong, Vanessa L. and Murphy, Rachel. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009. 6 -27

⁹ Webster, Chris and Zhao, Yanjing. "Entitlement to the Benefits of Urbanization: Comparing Migrants and Peri-urban Peasants." *Marginalization in Urban China: Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Webster, Chris and Wu, Fulong. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010. 59 - 72

¹⁰ Zheng, Tiantian.

were now needed to fill the industrial jobs being created. Further relaxation of the system has happened since the 1990s: A provision was made to allow the rural resident to buy "temporary urban residency permits" so the resident could work legally within the cities.¹¹ China's accession to the World Trade Organization has also forced leaders to allow some reformation to Hukou in order to liberate the movement of labor for the benefit of the economy.¹² However, a 2008 study from the University of Washington, argues that these reforms have not fundamentally changed the Hukou system, but have only decentralized the powers of Hukou to local governments. The present Hukou system remains active and continues to contribute to China's rural and urban disparity.¹³

This history has lead to the predicament China is now facing: a 'Floating' or non-resident population mostly living illegally in the cities is their main hard-labor workforce and therefore is driving the staggering economic gains of the past decade. There are myriad social ills plaguing these workers ranging from access to education and housing, to mental health problems that have lead to an epidemic of suicides, famously at the FoxConn plant in Shenzhen over the course of 10 months in 2010.¹⁴ Migrant workers living in the city are often not legally employed and therefore are not able to be a part of a local Danwei, or work unit, which organizes the social needs of a workforce including school for children, healthcare, housing, and often family planning approval such as

¹¹ Webster, Chris and Zhao, Yanjing. 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Buckingham, Will and Chan, Kam. "Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?" *The China Quarterly*. 2008. 582-606.

¹⁴ Barboza, David. "After Suicides, Scrutiny of China's Grim Factories." *The New York Times*. Jun. 6, 2010.

marriage licenses and birth planning.¹⁵ The migrant workers must find a place to live illegally, and because of the lack of security and access to the school systems, they will often leave their children behind in the rural provinces with elderly relatives. Those who do bring their children are forced to form volunteer schools, which are often shut down by the local government.¹⁶

The reasons a laborer would be willing to risk the possible punishment and the definite exploitation of a job in the cities is this is the only viable option to support children. China's agricultural sector is no longer based on smaller family farms but is industrialized into larger companies and requires fewer workers, therefore those who might have remained in the village are now forced to seek gainful employment elsewhere. Who the profits from this employment will end up supporting, whether it is a permanent state for these workers, and how this displacement and separation has affected the personal lives of all involved, particularly the children, is examined in the following two films.

Shifting Cultural Values in *Railroad of Hope*

The 2002 documentary feature *Railroad of Hope*, directed by Ning Ying, is only 56 minutes but features over 30 interviews with men and women, from the elderly to children, who are leaving their native Sichuan province in the South West of China to work as a seasonal cotton picker in the far Northwestern Province of Xingjiang. The land

¹⁵ Xu, Feng. *Women Migrant Workers in China's Economic Reform*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2002. 133.

¹⁶ *We are the...of Communism*. DVD. Directed by Cui Zi'en. 2007; degenerate Film.

is flatter, they've been told, the wages better and the taxes less steep. Many of the interviewees have never left their home village, less have ever been on a train. Some workers pile onto the train cars with an optimism that could only be the product of naiveté, others with the steely-eyed resolve that hints at years of discouragement. With the broad variety of interviewees, the film never lingers long on one particular story line or one specific aspect of this great migration. Instead Ning paints a broad picture of the plight of migrant workers, allowing the viewer to make the necessary connections and draw their own inferences.

This film differs from all the other features that have or will be discussed in that it does not focus its narrative on a particular individual or family as the stand in for a broader issue. Instead, Ying attempts to pack her hour-long film with as many characters and interviews as possible, never revisiting a narrative thread or showing the resolution of a conflict. In this way she breaks free from the narrative constraints that are typically enforced on even documentary features. Paradoxically, much of her framing shows that she is primarily interested in the characters and their stories. Where many other documentaries tend to place their characters in their environment by favoring long shots, Ying stays in the close-up for most of the film, focusing on the faces of the interviewees and lingering in this frame for longer than necessary, forcing both the interviewees and the audience to come to terms with the emotions and information before them. Ning Ying said in an interview about this subject: "If a film has to be approved, there is so much discussion between the filmmakers and the subjects and then the filmmakers and the film

bureau about which reality you can show and which reality you cannot show. So I said OK, lets try to make a documentary not to build up a miracle, but to catch a miracle as it is happens in real life."¹⁷

Ying, however, does not break the typical mold in how she portrays the role of the director. Instead of fading into the background like Lixin Fan in *Last Train Home* or involving his own story in the film as Chung does in *Up The Yangtze*, she compromises with these two extremes and remains an unseen but definitely heard and felt presence and necessarily so. Her interview questions are what shapes the story that is told and what questions she chose, which ranged from “have you been on a train before” to “what is happiness to you”, influenced the way the characters presented themselves and also how they evaluated their journey. In a film that relies almost exclusively on interviews the director’s agenda and purpose becomes clear almost immediately, and her purpose is evaluating the emotional toll that this labor system has taken on these migrant workers. Her more nuanced purposes are less clear, however.

The core of her search is not to elucidate that this system of seasonal workers travelling hundreds of miles from home to seek decent wages is detrimental to the mental health and social stability of these workers; that is self-evident. Instead, the overriding theme of these interviews is the reason behind this sacrifice, which is for some the hope for a better future for the next generation. Uniformly, every adult with children depending on them lists their children’s success as chief among the reasons to make this

¹⁷ “Interview: Ning Ying” *City Weekend*. http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/beijing/articles/cw-magazine/reviews/Movies_CW19Interview/. Accessed Mar. 4, 2012.

long and excruciating trip: the more money they can earn, the more chance their child has to prosper.

This reason may seem purely altruistic and a drastic sacrifice that Western parents would be unlikely to make for their children but the parents are not without their own interests. The importance of family is paramount in Chinese society, but not necessarily the togetherness or closeness of a family but the prosperity and longevity of a certain family line.¹⁸ The living are indebted to the ancestors for their own lives and repay them not only by honoring their shrines but also by ensuring that the next generation will continue to climb in prestige, therefore allow them to honor their ancestors in more grandiose ways. Therefore, what could seem like a purely economic enterprise of seeking higher wages far from home is also supported by millennia of traditions about filial piety and the importance of increasing prosperity throughout the generations. One interviewee, an older woman, succinctly explains this mentality: “[Migrating for work] is for preserving the clan, our elders did everything for us, we do everything for our children. Every generation should be better than the last.”

Given an extremely limited filming location, a Sichuan train station and the interior of train cars on the route to Xinjiang, Ying makes use of the little room for creative maneuvering in unexpected ways. What at first seems to be an odd soundtrack motif, namely a very gauche version of Beethoven’s Fur Elise and Mozart’s Piano

¹⁸ Ivanhoe, Philip J. and Van Norden, Bryan W. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Inc, 2001.

Concerto in C, is made clear at the end of the film. What initially appeared to be non-diegetic sound melds seamlessly to reveal that it was in fact being broadcast on the train cars as a alarm clock. Ying's emphasis of this strange choice by the railway line could indicate many things, including the railroad's manufactured sense of prestige and comfort which contrasts harshly with the images of the cramped and crowded cars, limbs sprawling and dust from the Gobi spilling in.

It could also be a nod to the audience: Ying screened this film at many European film festivals and it won the Grand Prix for documentary at the Cinéma du Réel Film Festival in Paris, 2002. Keeping her audience in mind, he might have wanted the jarring effect of hearing such familiar music but seeing it associated with extremely unfamiliar images. The discord caused by this juxtaposition might be part of the effect he wishes to achieve in his audience; a realization of this disparity causes cultural tension. Already intending to play on the materialistic guilt of the audience, the reminder of their own luxuries and way of life in stark contrast to those of the workers is an intentional jab at the heartstrings. In an interview, Ying said that she made this movie to "tell the truth" and to show the realities of these people's lives to those who would not be privy to them otherwise. She explains that in regards to this goal, she needs to overcome the gaps in culture, space and time between the subjects and the audience. "The most important thing is searching the deepest common resonance between yourself behind the camera, and your subject in front of the camera. When you find it you will overcome any problem of

artistic form, or productive limitation and even the differences of race or culture.”¹⁹ Her use of western music might be one way she bridges the gap, but it also serves to strengthen the contrast.

Ying has taken this massive movement of people and made it feel massive and impersonal, which is difficult to capture in films. Her quick changes and brief interviews almost overwhelm the viewer, and within an hour she has displayed every variety of character but has united them by making clear the goal that they share: prosperity. What divides them is the ultimate end of that prosperity. For many of the younger interviewees, they have already left school and are now solely interested in making as much money as possible, for their own ends, to be able to fully participate in the new consumer culture that is gripping New China. These are the children who were raised during the most drastic changes that China’s economy was undergoing and although they want to improve their material situation, they are not yet able to conceive of a time when a peasant worker might be able to attend university and become a wage worker. They exist in the middle stages of the transition between a communist and market economy: they are no longer able to support themselves through merely farming in their home villages like their parents, but they are not able to break out of the peasant cycle completely through gaining an education or more skilled labor work and therefore are forced into migration to find manual labor. The industrialization and modernization of a society, especially one that developed as quickly as China, is built on the back of these workers.

¹⁹ Mubi.com. “Ning Ying: Director.” http://mubi.com/cast_members/504. Accessed Mar. 4, 2012.

This is in direct contrast with the adults who are being interviewed, those with young children. These workers are hoping to earn money, yes, but to facilitate the education of their children and to lift their future family out of poverty and into the life of a respected member of modern society. More than one child who has been brought on the trip expresses the desire to serve in the police force when they grow up and their parents beam proudly behind them, knowing that this journey makes this dream one more step closer to possible. These children are the next link in the development chain, they represent the promise that there will eventually be a break in the cycle of the countryside, that this youngest generation will have the education and opportunities that was not possible for their parents or even those in their early twenties, just the previous generation. The drastic changes occurring between each generation is a mark of the compressed modernization that is happening in China.²⁰ Ying's final shot is of the sun rising over the Gobi at the beginning of the final day of travel and she lingers on the groups of families as they breakfast together in the bright morning light. The image of the family is what we're left with as the film closes and it's no accident the message of family is what we take away.

²⁰ Kyung-Sup, Chang. "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents." *Economy and Society*. Vol. 28, No. 1, Feb. 1990. 30-55.

The Future Reality in *Last Train Home*

Last Train Home, a 2009 documentary directed by Lixin Fan, chronicles a period of three years in the life of the Zhang family, from early 2006 to late 2008. The Zhang's are a family from rural Sichuan but the father and mother live 2000 kilometers away in Guangzhou working in a textile factory. The film mostly focuses on the two weeks a year during the Lunar New Year when the parents are able to travel home to see their children, eleven-year-old son Yang and 16 year old daughter Qin. The children, who have remained in Sichuan, maintain the family's small farm and attend school, while being cared for by their grandmother. The film depicts three separate New Year's trips and as this event passes each year we can see further deterioration in the family structure. The parents hope that with the money they make they will be able to support both of their children's continued studies and hopeful progression on to college and a more highly skilled career. The effects of these desires on the eldest, Qin, becomes the focus of both the film and the family, finally culminating in her abandoning her studies, leaving the family farm behind, and taking first a factory job and then a job in a nightclub in Shenzhen. The film ends on an uncertain note, with Qin not making the trip home for the last New Year's celebration

Through the Zhangs, Fan, a former journalist with the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV who now lives in Montreal, tells the story of the hundreds of millions of Chinese

migrant workers.²¹ As Fan himself said in an interview, “It’s a family drama that serves as an allegory about where China is heading and the profound changes it has gone through, from being an agricultural society to an industrial nation. It’s a huge story.” How Fan combines the elements of narrative or personal and logical story, while also depicting the greater realities of the phenomenon is achieved mainly through his style as a director and his ability to be an outside observer.

Fan quickly distinguishes himself from many other current documentary auteurs by aligning himself strictly with the *cinéma vérité* style, which involves a more naturalistic and observationalist method of filming.²² Fan does not make his presence known, either on camera or through voice-of-god narration. The only influence the director exerts is in cinematography and editing stages: there are no interviews, no graphics, and no non-narrative images. There are several moments in this film, however, where the authenticity of the moment is questionable due to the family’s reaction to the camera. Qin even says, in an extremely emotional moment, “you wanted to film the real me, this is it!” This could be simply acknowledging the position of the director in the film, but whether this outburst would have occurred without the added strain of their lives being chronicled, is uncertain. Fan also exerts his editorial stance in his soundtrack choices, which although sparse, help to emphasize his supposed agenda. For example, after Qin has left her family and moved to Shenzhen, he depicts her receiving a haircut in a fashionable salon, he uses

²¹ Wasey, Ad. “Filmmaker Interview: Last Train Home’s Lixin Fan.” *Rooftop Films*. Aug. 12, 2010. <http://rooftopfilms.com/blog/2010/08/filmmaker-interview-last-train-homes-lixin-fan.html>. Accessed Mar. 7, 2012.

²² Ponech, Trevor. *What is Non-Fiction Cinema?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999.

a Chinese girl pop song to emphasize her desire to become part of this culture she has never experienced.

The style Fan employs also allows him to seamlessly weave together the story of this particular family with the larger story of the migrant worker in China. His repeated use of the long shot, particularly when the character being filmed is in the background space of the frame, is a technique employed so that the audience will not only focus on this particular story but on the environment the character is inhabiting, be it a lush corn field in Sichuan or a grimy cafeteria in a worker's dormitory. The larger narrative of the inequality and hardship of the lives of these workers is found at the edges of the frame. When he is interviewing Father Zhang during his factory shift, we see the babies of his fellow workers nestled among the piles of fabrics on the factory floor, the questions of the origin of that narrative are never answered, that is someone else's story.

When he does work in the close-up, Fan is careful to linger for longer than would be typical in a narrative film, certainly, but also longer than the time allowed in most documentaries. An early scene that shows a phone conversation between Qin and her mother, the camera holds a steady on her as she runs the gamut of emotions while speaking with her far-away daughter. This lingering shot is the first indication in the film that there is tension in the family, particularly between these two women and Fan's camera's insistence is what captures it. Another of the rare close-ups occurs when, during the first New Years meal, the parents are expressing their hope that Qin will study hard and succeed in school the camera catches all of Qin's uncomfortable reactions to this

pronouncement. We are offered a hint at her feelings before she has the chance to express them openly, we are being asked to put ourselves in the frame of mind of this teenager.

Although the character the audience judges the most harshly is also the one we are asked to identify with and focus on most closely. To the Western audiences of the film, the sacrifice of the Zhang parents is almost unfathomable and the rebellious and ungrateful reaction of their daughter is designed to draw ire. We are first hand witnesses to the hardships her parents have suffered in order to send money home for their children, but the film is challenging us to put ourselves in the shoes of Qin, who does not see the conditions her parents live in or really fully understand the sacrifices they are making on her behalf. Qin has spent her entire life seeing her parents only once a year, feeling abandoned and disconnected from them. She says in one scene: “My parents didn’t raise me, they barely lived with me, how can there be any feeling?” She feels that they have left their children behind for the selfish pursuit of money in the city. Her actions may seem like that of a spoiled child, but more accurately they are those typical of any angst-ridden teen in the world and her desire is not for luxuries but for freedom, freedom to make her own money in the city. “I thought I’d like to work in a factory but I can’t really get used to it here. Am I happy? After all, freedom is happiness.”

The film was an official selection for documentary at many film festivals in the United States and Europe, including Sundance Film Festival, and it was on the short list for best documentary in 2009 Academy Awards. Like *Railroad of Hope*, Fan is catering to a Western audience but does so in a very different way and for some different

motivations. Part of his motivation is to show some of the Western consumers of the products where their goods are made and what they are supporting with their purchases. Although he is also critical of the Chinese government for allowing these conditions for their workers, he is mainly critical of those in the West for allowing this “labor to feed their greed”.²³ In an interview, Fan stated, “I wish the Western audience would think about the relationships between themselves and their lifestyles. I want them to think that their life is somehow connected to how these migrant workers live and their sufferings. And we don’t bother to think why our life is like this. Things are cheap because someone else has paid, and it’s not being projected on the price tag. I think we consume too much here in the developed world.”²⁴

Fan’s sentiment is carried out through several scenes and images he chose to include in the film. In one of the opening shots, we see pallets of cargo being loaded onto freight ships, and if there was any doubt about their destination the words “Made in China” are emblazoned in English on the side of each crate. Another scene later in the film shows a male worker in Qin’s garment factory lifting a pair of jeans from the completed pile and scoffing: “Forty-inch waistline? You can fit two Chinese in that.” The brand name jeans also feature later, when Qin laments that she would never be able to afford this name brand and jokes about taking some home with her. The connection with the Western, likely American, consumer is omnipresent but the gap between those who

²³ “Last Train Home: Interview with Lixin Fan.” *The Telegraph*, Feb. 4, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/sukhdevsandhu/8303624/Last-Train-Home-interview-with-Lixin-Fan.html>. Accessed Mar. 7, 2012.

²⁴ Wasey, Ad. “Filmmaker Interview: Last Train Home’s Lixin Fan.” *Rooftop Films*. Aug. 12, 2010. <http://rooftopfilms.com/blog/2010/08/filmmaker-interview-last-train-homes-lixin-fan.html>. Accessed Mar. 7, 2012.

make the clothes and those who wear them seems to be expanding at the same rate as the waistlines on the jeans.

The style differences between the two directors also present two different sides of the same coin: Fan achieves his emotional resonance not by overwhelming the audience with the number of stories presented in a single train ride but by tracking the real life implications of this migrant worker trend over several years of change in one family. The audience members might see aspects of their own children in Qin's profanity laden outburst towards the end of the film, or be able to understand the strained relationship between mother and daughter. His emphasis on family as the genesis for this entire trend is even more overt than in the previous film and his equal attention on both the daughter and the parents gives equal sympathy to the contending sides of this issue. Where Ying made the staggering number of migrant workers feel staggering, Fan made it feel personal and relatable.

However, Fan shows the second half of the story begun by Ying. The workers in *Railroad of Hope* who expressed the hope that their children would benefit from their sacrifice could have been the Zhangs as they share the same goal. Sadly, we see that these wishes and the promise they held for these workers, do not always come to fruition. His question is no longer "what is the cause of this migration" because the presumed benefit to the family as a cause is clear, but the question has become "does migrating vast distances to work actually benefit or hurt the family?" The daughter does not go to college, like her parents hoped, but rather follows them into the life of a migrant worker

precisely because she feels so disconnected from them and their sacrifice and hopes for her. Fan said in an interview, “I wanted to find a family that had been separated for 10 to 20 years – the same period that China has been opening up,” says Fan. “One whose children are at the age when they need to decide about what to do about their future: whether to stay on the farm or to leave like their parents.”²⁵ Fan also seems to be asking by the end of the film if the daughter’s choice is indeed the ungrateful one it appears initially? The answer to this is less clear and remains to be seen, as millions of young adults in China like Qin are currently living this experience.

Conclusion

The population is aging. It may become old before it becomes rich. The parents’ generation have been working in factories for 20, 30 years. Soon, they will have to retire and return to the countryside. And the younger generation of migrant workers, they would come out and work in the factory, but they grew up along with China’s opening up, so they are adopting a lot of new ideas and they want to be free and they are embracing individualism. There’s no way you can send all those people back when they grow old. Will China be strong enough to provide all these job opportunities and build enough cities to house all these people? It’s going to be a big challenge.

Corporations find ways to make things cheaper. They outsource their production to developing countries, but the workers don’t have much bargaining power. And, especially for countries like China, with very little labor rights, they cannot fight back.

²⁵ “Last Train Home: Interview with Lixin Fan.”

How will the Chinese government respond? They need to have a stable society and they need to get all these people employed, their 1.3 billion people. What can the leaders do? If they raise their labor costs through higher salaries and worker benefits, the corporations will just move the factory to countries with lower costs, such as Vietnam, India, or Thailand. The chain of globalization has made these questions much more difficult to answer.

China faces a crisis of development that has never been faced by a global superpower. They have been undergoing their major development and industrialization at a time of unparalleled media coverage and global information sharing. All modern first world countries were able to industrialize by exploiting cheap labor and benefiting from poor health and safety standards for their workers. Though the United States and Great Britain now have labor unions and labor laws to protect their workers, little more than a hundred years ago the conditions in these countries were little better than those found in China today. The difference is that China faces global scrutiny and criticism for its labor problems, which are, in fact, a natural process of the development cycle.

This understanding of the issue doesn't excuse the abuses that have been perpetrated by companies like FoxConn or heal the wounds of the millions of workers, like those portrayed in the two films, but it does widen the frame to allow the larger picture to emerge. This is a picture that the adult workers of the films can see glimmering in the distance: a time when China has fully industrialized and enjoys the same labor protections of other first-world countries. The long-term goal of the migrant workers

understands this system of temporary hardship more than most of its critics, which is the bettering of the future for the future generations.

Chapter Four

Opening Up: A Consumer Infatuation and a Globalized Backlash

Introduction

According to the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, domestic consumption will be the main driver of China's economic growth in 2012, with a growth of up to fifteen percent. This is the first time in a decade that consumer consumption will surpass government investment. The major consumer group will remain urban residents, despite the faster growth of per capita incomes for rural residents. Urban residents with a disposable income, often classified as China's burgeoning middle class, continue to spend mainly on real estate, cars, and luxury items such as brand name clothing and interior decorations.⁶¹

These figures represent the maturation of a trend that has been growing for the past several decades, arguably since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the 80s and 90s. The current generations, in a marked departure from their predecessors, are eagerly entering the consumer marketplace in order to advance their personal income. Today's youth represent China's first generation whose lives have, from the very beginning, been accompanied by the country's reform and opening up with no lived experience of Maoist socialism. Thus, their identity construction is being played out in a dramatically different socio-cultural context compared with previous generations. China's urban children and youth today are known to enjoy material prosperity and well being unimaginable to previous generations. The sustained double-digit growth in GNP in the past two decades has led to much greater purchasing power for urban families. Today's urban youth are

⁶¹ "Domestic consumption takes driver's seat." *Business Daily Update* 22 Mar. 2012.

known to be brand conscious and fashion-savvy, the consumption of the Western brands Nike or McDonald's has become a symbol of material modernity and new cultural expressions in China. They find themselves at the center of material comfort, rampant consumerism, and broadened access to information across the world.⁶²

The post-1989 generation has often been called the Me-Generation, reflecting their rampant materialism and self-involvement.

The road to this materialism has been long and varied, and in order to understand the ideals that are held by this current generation, it is first necessary to examine those held by previous generations.

History of the Opening Up and Reform Era

China's rise features a new pattern of compressed development that combines political flexibility with formal policies and informal practices reflecting China's multiple traditions. A variety of economic processes of Sinicization will inflect globalization in the same way that Americanization and other civilization processes have done. The late a country starts the process of industrialization, the more organizational power is needed to protect domestic producers against foreign competitors, to mobilize limited capital and to target those industries that had proved successful. In compressed development, different stages and sequences of development are collapsed into a single point in time. As a result, developing countries face very different international and domestic conditions than did late developers only a few decades ago. Compressed development has always had a social dimension, with the clash of traditional, modern, and post modern practices and

⁶² Liu, Fengshu. *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet, and the Self*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 58 – 60.

values. Therefore, China's very economic rise has caused its social problems such as corruption, poor labor standards, environmental problems, and wealth gap. Do these challenges fully occupy all the informational and logistical capacities of the Chinese state?⁶³

Particularly since Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Southern Inspection Tour," the Chinese government has "internationalized" China, opening the country to a wide variety of international economic and cultural forces. This is part of the concerted effort to make China rich, to raise the standard of living of the population, and offer a varied cultural life. Importantly, the increase of the social status of the new moneyed middle class was tied to the stability of the CCP, the CCP would make them rich and they would return with their loyalty. In contrast the educated generation of the 1980s who were searching for life's meaning, which ended in the massacre in Tiananmen, this generation is openly success oriented. The regime has placed an emphasis on performance and material success in order to legitimate their power and are actively encouraged value as the key indicator of worth. The state lost its legitimacy in 1989 for many youth and so out-dated appeals to discredited ideology were no longer a useful tool for gaining support. There was a power societal reaction against the extreme asceticization of Chinese life under Mao and the subsequent downfall of his ideal lead to a desire for material wealth and a suspicion of all moral values.⁶⁴

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, China developed a modern industrial

⁶³ Zhu, Tianbiao. "Compressed Development, flexible practices, and Multiple Traditions in China's Rise." *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilization processes beyond East and West*. Ed. by Peter J. Katzenstein. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. 99 – 120.

⁶⁴ Rosen, Stanley. "The State of Youth/Youth and the State in early 21st-Century China: the Triumph of the Urban Rich?" *State and Society in 21st-century China: Crisis, Contention, and legitimation*. Ed. By Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. 159-180.

sector, which stimulated modest but significant economic growth by the 1930s.⁶⁵ Foreign investment in many areas of China, particularly Hong Kong and Shanghai, helped improve China's global influence and trade connections. Before the collapse of international trade that followed the onset of the Great Depression, China's share of world trade and its ratio of foreign trade to GDP achieved levels that were not regained for over sixty years.⁶⁶

The barely-established economy was heavily disrupted by the war against Japan and the Chinese Civil War from 1937 to 1949, after which the victorious Communist Party installed a planned economy, with a focus on the state-owned industrial sector.⁶⁷ Afterwards, the economy largely stagnated and was disrupted by the Great Leap Forward famine, which killed between 30 and 40 million people, and the purges of the Cultural Revolution further depleted the economy. Urban Chinese citizens experienced virtually no increase in living standards from 1957 onwards, and rural Chinese had no better living standards in the 1970s than the 1930s.⁶⁸

The economic performance of China during this era was particularly poor in comparison with other East Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The economy was riddled with huge inefficiencies and malinvestments, and with Mao's death in 1976, the CPC leadership was faced with the problem of salvaging a failing economy.⁶⁹ After Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1980, the party elite decided to endorse his market-oriented reforms, which involved agricultural reforms through land

⁶⁵ Dickson, Bruce J. *Wealth Into Power: The Communist Party's Embrace of China's Private Sector*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 48.

⁶⁶ Ibid 55.

⁶⁷ Ibid 57.

⁶⁸ Yan, Yunxiang. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. New York, NY: Berg, 2009.

⁶⁹ Dittmer, Lowell and Liu, Guoli. *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2006. 125.

privatization, allowing private businesses and market pricing, and, most importantly, allowing foreign investment in special economic zones, including Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.⁷⁰ These and more radical reforms continued into the 1990s, including the reduction of tariffs, trade barriers, and regulations. The leaders since Deng's death in 1997 have generally continued his reform-minded agenda and have seen a steady growth of the economy since.

The main criticism that these reform policies have faced is the widening of the inequality gap between the rich and poor, with the urban elite and burgeoning middle class seeing almost all of the benefits from this economic expansion, while those in the countryside have been mostly left behind.⁷¹ This criticism also indicates that the complacency created by the urban elite will lead to a generation without any social or political motivation, a generation fueled by consumption and lacking in compassion for the poor or disenfranchised. Public opinion polls of this urban middle class shows their chief concerns to lie with accumulating material possessions or social prestige, and that the revolutionary or reformation fervor that characterized the previous generations has all but disappeared.⁷²

In addition to breaking with many of the cultural values of the Communist Era, the current youth have begun to reject many much more ancient Chinese values, particularly the Confucian values that characterized proper social interaction for more than two millennia. Instead of focusing on the collective, in general, the Chinese youth of today display a drive towards individual goals. Chinese urban youth's individualism has a

⁷⁰ Ibid, 133.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Yan, 72.

double emphasis on individual freedom and material achievement, valuing both self-expression and materialism. The two forms that this individualism takes in China today align closely with those outlined by American sociologist Robert Bellah: the utilitarian individualist and the expressive individualist.⁷³

The utilitarian generation is more easily defined as the ku generation, which is a transliteration of the English word cool, which represents the stylish and the fun. It clearly represents an individualism that is much influenced by Western pop culture and the values it represents, with its reference on modernity and individuality. An important phrase for them is “it is most important to have fun.”⁷⁴ The youth of the utilitarian individualism are preoccupied with social economic mobility through making money and gaining social power. Their lifestyle goals resemble the middle-class life in Western developed societies. Bill Gates is a popular role model, only in his role as a successful entrepreneur and richest man in the world; also many disaffected youth are obsessed with his lack of a college degree. However, his charity work is always forgotten.⁷⁵

Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized. It usually arises in opposition to and rebelling against the more pervasive utilitarian individualism. This style of individualism doesn’t focus on the individual aspect but rather the expressive aspect; the key here is to find your own passion and to master it. The individual piece is merely the realization that the truest form of expression is what is expressed personally, from a unique place for the individual. This is the aspect that most

⁷³ Liu, 68.

⁷⁴ Liu

⁷⁵ Liu

deviates from the utilitarian individualism, which can be expressive if that suits its purpose, but individualism here is not practiced for its own sake. It is a necessary part of the self-discovery and self-development that comes with true expression.

The two following films display both of these styles of individualism, with the utilitarian individualism on display by the “ku” seeking girls in *Super, Girls!* while the more fringe actors in *Follow Your Heart* are seeking a more authentic type of individuality in their reappropriation of the hip hop culture.

False Promises in *Super, Girls!*

The 2008 documentary *Super, Girls!* by director Jian Yi was inspired by the massively successful 2005 television competition show Super Girl Contest, a female singing contest in the style of American Idol and Pop Idol from the U.K. After the enormous popularity the show’s first season winner, Li Yunchun, received, the second season’s audition rounds attract more girls than ever and Yi chronicles the several day audition process for the Shenyang regional contest. Shenyang is the provincial capital of Liaoning, the northeastern province most close to Beijing and therefore the closest regional competition for all Beijing singers. The top eight singers from the Shenyang region will go to the National finals in Chang’sa, Hunan, and will compete against all of the other provincial regions for the national title.

Director Yi points to his contemporaries in documentary films and their topics of choice as the main reason he chose this to make the film. “I feel that many filmmakers choose to focus on the margins of society, which can be good to give them a voice, but I

often feel that mainstream Chinese culture is not adequately represented in these films.”⁷⁶

In 2006, the defining feature of mainstream youth culture was arguably the Super Girl singing contest and the cultural phenomenon that it represented also illuminated many of the deeper social insecurities inherent in an entirely pop and glamor based culture. In the first few scenes of the film, Yi interviews several different young women, including a college student from Beijing, an unemployed waitress from Shenyang, and a young online blogger, all of whom are auditioning to be Super Girls. These women are not only connected by their musical ambitions but more importantly by their desire for some kind of social recognition. In fact, the musical aspect seems to take a back seat to the glamour of being in the contest as the goal. Their lack of passion for the expressive side of the contest is summed up when one says, “Well, I don’t want to get an internship or something, so I thought, why not try for Super Girl?”

After following the failed auditions of several of these young women, Yi focuses the majority of the film on Wang Yunan, a local seventeen year old who had already passed the first round for Shenyang but returned to the audition location daily to sell pens to the newcomers as well as to “seek out my rivals”. Wang then appoints herself not only the arbiter of knowledge for all things Super Girl but also the de facto guide for the film. She stands outside the audition hall making a classic sales pitch for her pens, while offering unsolicited advice on clothing and singing style. Yi’s decision to follow Wang and her various friends throughout the entire process, from early triumph, to eventual disappointment, then to giddy fandom, allows the viewer to see beyond the surface

⁷⁶ Ellis, Angela. “Super Girls in China: Holy Gender Bending.” *NPR*. May 9, 2008.

objectives of these young women into the deep despair behind all of their superficial swagger.

The core desire behind the young women vying to be Super Girls is a clear example of utilitarian individualism: the desire to seem like an individual because it is 'ku', because it is part of modern youth culture, not because of a deeper desire for self expression. Many of the girls in the film present carbon copies of each other and the pop idols they aspire to be, but underneath the surface the individual within them is both stifled by this conformity and disheartened by the lack of freedom it offers. The lure of fame and fortune seems so tantalizingly close that it's understandable that millions of young women are clamoring to compete for it, but the realism of not being deemed special enough forces the utilitarian individual mindset into a corner: how to be ku when you have been rejected? How to be a part of this consumer culture when you don't want to get a job? How do you keep from being other when the pop culture values are shifting constantly under your feet?

Yi sticks with Wang's story line perhaps because of her willingness to be so forthcoming with her personal background and family problems. Like many other girls we encounter, her parents are divorced. Her father, who has remarried and had another child, supports Wang by renting an apartment for her and paying all her living expenses. We see him calling later in the film to make sure she was able to afford a new outfit for her audition and that she has enough money (several hundred Yuan) for the week. Her mother, however, is not doing as well, Wang attributes this difficulty to several factors: "she's a woman, after all. Plus, she's honest, and she isn't particularly assertive." The emotional pain caused by her parents' separation is clear early on, but what is less clear is

the reason behind her attitude towards each now. She seemingly resents her father for his abandoning her, but at the same time admires him for his business skills and readily accepts all the money he offers. Her feelings towards her mother are closest to pity: a woman who is unable to be business savvy enough to earn her own money. When she describes how her father might not approve of her choice of job or her entering the contest, she asserts that she is the master of her own voice, then going back to browsing through jeans that her father will ultimately end up paying for. If money and material items are everything, it would be almost impossible for Wang to stand up to her sole provider and still maintain her excessive standard of living.

Wang also exhibits her insecurities and contradictions through her clothing choices. The first Super Girl Contest winner was Li Yuchun, who received over 3.5 million cell phone votes to claim the title and became an overnight sensation. Li Yuchun stood out from the other contestants mainly because of her androgynous style and low alto singing voice, and when she won this style became just as popular as her hit singles, just as quickly. Half of the contestants we see are still sporting the hyper-feminine pink dresses and high heels that were considered more fashionable in previous years, but there's a strong contingency of these new tomboyish girls who have clearly modeled themselves after Li Yuchun based on her success. Jian Yi, when interviewed by NPR, suggested that one reason for the cropped hair, baggy jeans and big shirts is that most of the call-in voters on the show are girls, and looking like a cute boy in this all-female competition can make a performer more appealing.⁷⁷ Wang and her friend, Lucy, reinforce this analysis when discussing a fellow contestant, Fu Jing: Lucy takes a photo

⁷⁷ Ellis.

with her and says “I’ll keep this in my phone and tell people she’s my boyfriend!”

Whatever the cause behind the phenomenon, Wang’s strict adherence to this trendy new style shows how insecure she is. The blindly following of trends is part of the consumer culture, but it offers no comfort, as Wang finds out. In one scene, she describes how she prefers to wear her clothes baggy and her sunglasses large to obscure her face and body, so her ‘ugliness’ is hidden from view. She also goes up to other contestants and critiques their style if it’s the feminine dresses that she has rejected, saying that if you get too dressed up the judges will think you’re trying too hard. The line she’s trying to draw is that this style is out and hers is in, hoping to cement her place in the ‘ku’ crowd. By the end of the film, Wang has been eliminated from the competition and her friend Fu Jing, who also has a masculine style, has made it to the top ten. Wang, now a member of Fu Jing’s fan club, takes a photo with her when they’re wearing the same outfit and Fu remarks that she’ll have to change before she goes on camera: Wang is no longer in style and therefore she’s out altogether. The ‘ku’ ideal has changed and she has been left behind entirely.

Wang, as well as the other 1266 contestants to make it to the second round of auditions are all drawn in by the promise of the show: if you’re ‘ku’ enough and in the correct way, the world is yours. Enough people considered Li Yuchun ku, and even though she’s popular as a pop star and entertainer, she’s also admired because her fame brings her material wealth. In China, pop offers the promise of unlimited glamour and glory and this is the narrative all of these young women are buying into. However, if this lifestyle is all you seek and where you place your values, there will ultimately be the crushing realization that the rich and well connected have an unfair advantage. A friend

of Wang's, Momo, another tomboy devotee, reacts poorly to being eliminated from the second round and accuses the contest of being rigged for those with connections. As she speeds away in her Mercedes SUV, she vows that she'll use her own connections through her wealthy family to find a spot in the top ten. The irony of fighting nepotism with more nepotism is lost on Momo but picked up by Wang, who, when she's eliminated the next day sobs that the whole show is just a game. This realization is maybe her most astute observation in the film. Utilitarian individualism brings no real fulfillment and this is the reality that many modern Chinese youths are finding.

In the midst of all these girls trying to out-trend the other, is a lone relic from a not-so-distant past. As Wang awaits her audition for the second round, she scoffs at a country girl dressed in a Red Guard outfit, asking, "Is she going to sing a Cultural Revolution song?" Yi then turns to interview the girl, who identifies herself as from the countryside and is aware of her outsider status; she's used to it. City people don't treat the country people as equals, she says, "they treat us like dirt". What she takes as simple classism might be the surface reaction to a much deeper wound. In this rich, urban, Westernized culture, she represents the intrusion of an alternate China supposedly long buried, but lurking just beyond the frame.

The Red Guard Super Girl also serves as a reminder of a past that the other Super Girls, and China as a whole, has not yet entirely left behind. Director Yi explains, "There was a search for identity after the Cultural Revolution because there was no tradition left anymore and we weren't very different from the Americans or others around the world. This is a very confusing time in our history, there's a split personality for all of us."⁷⁸ The

⁷⁸ Ellis.

traditional culture that had defined China up until the Communist Revolution was supposedly delivered a fatal blow by the anesthetizing period of the Cultural Revolution, but a five thousand year old culture is not so easily removed from the cultural psyche. So, even as these girls strive to be modern and western, aspects of their Chinese cultural roots show through. One hopeful contestant explains, “you only have three chances to change your destiny, to make a difference in your life.” Others, including the Red Guard girl speak of the show as a way of changing their destiny or “be the master of my own destiny.” The cultural tendency towards collectivism can also be seen in the propensity to form ardent fan clubs around your favorite singer, often taking to the street to gather votes for them. Although it might be hard to see it behind all the stylized clothes, the traditional values of China still inform the worldviews of these young women.

What comes through most clearly in *Super, Girls!* is its portrait of a very old culture rushing headlong into the hyper-capitalist future, in which business values trump all others, individualism clashes with traditional ideals of collectivism and community, and self-promotion negates Confucian humility, and finding there to be uncomfortable growing pains in this enforced transition. When the national finalists gather onstage to sing the show’s theme song, *I’m empowered by joy. I shine like no other. Every caring eye sees my growth*, we see that this might be true for those who have made it to the stage, but for those who were left behind, this dream is still out of reach.⁷⁹ The final image we’re left with is of two young girls watching these Super Girls on the monitors; they will inherit these social aspirations and will likely be just as disappointed by them.

⁷⁹ Kim, Nelson. “Super, Girls!: Everyone’s a Star.” *Hammer to Nail*. April 23, 2009. <http://www.hammertonail.com/reviews/documentary/super-girls-film-review/>

A Global Movement in *Follow Your Heart*

The 2007 documentary directed by English-Chinese Duncan Jepson, chronicles the underground hip hop culture through a series of interviews with industry professionals and profiles of five rising stars in the Shanghai scene. The film's central action revolves around the first hip hop party in the small city of Guiyang in Guizhou which would bring these various players from the hip hop scene together in a exhibition style party. The main characters all represent different aspects of the burgeoning hip hop scene in China: Gary Wang, a DJ, Sic Cheung, a graffiti artist, Wang Bo, a freestyle rapper, Stanly Wang, a breakdancer, and Momo, a fashion designer/model. The film, although revolving around the Guiyang exhibition mainly focuses on interviews about Chinese culture, hip-hop, consumerism, and American influence. Jepson also supplements the interviews with statistics about the youth culture in China in comparison with adult values.

Jepson's outside position, allows him to evaluate the cultural clash and combinations that are occurring in Shanghai, including the increasing popularity of hip-hop. The point of view he comes from, one of both a western and Chinese background, allow him an insight into not only the art forms roots but also how it has been transformed by the Chinese values. His connections also let us see the story from both sides of the consumer coin: from the producers of the goods and content that the Chinese youth crave, and the Chinese youth themselves, responding to the attempts by these global brands to market to them. Jepson offers something that no other documentary has been able to offer: interviews with the Vice President of Marketing for PepsiCo in China, or of Dior Couture in Asia. Motorola, Universal records, all of these name brand directors

use the statistics they've gathered to make sweeping generalizations about the Chinese consumer: they're self-infatuated, they're optimistic, they're status obsessed, they hate their parents. All of these assumptions are indeed based on figures that Jepson shows in the first section of the film, and while they hold true for many urban youth in China, the rest of the film chronicles the section of the youth market that is reacting against this image obsessed consumer that has been created.

The young Chinese featured in this film form a stark contrast to the girls featured in *Super, Girls!*. Their goals and dreams are different and their satisfaction much more real and accessible. Theirs is an expressive individualism, one that is born out of a true desire to realize something hidden and unique about themselves. As the graffiti artist Cheung puts it, "graffiti is not a hobby for me, it a passion hidden deep inside me and this is the best way to let it out". The five lead characters reject the desire for money and material possessions that many of their peers find to be of the most importance. They all speak about how hip-hop either saved them from a life of mediocrity and dissatisfaction or how it allowed them to channel their frustrations into an art form that was rewarding. These five descend on Guiyang ready to sell the gospel of hip-hop, but only if it is received for the proper reasons.

These youths all seem very aware and also wary of the growing pop consumer culture that they find springing up around them. One DJ who is studying under Gary Wang describes how his friends view the world: "I want to learn, my peers just want to make money, which I think is very short sighted. My views are in the minority, however. People just don't want to be challenged anymore, doing your own thing makes you an outsider." The style of this film, which focuses on interviews much more heavily than

any of the previous five films studied, is conducive to this sort of studied response about the world around them. Most of the other five artists mirror this sentiment in their own statements, casting off statements like “money is importance, but you shouldn’t forget your ideals” and “a lot of people now are buying into this culture without having an idea what it means.” As stated in the first section this chapter, the expressive individualism is often formed in response and contrast to the utilitarian individualism that forms the norm for society. These young adults are able to distinguish themselves mainly through the lens of being “other”, of rejecting the cultural standard in favor of something that departs from it not only stylistically but also in values.

The difference between their motivations and the motivations of the Super Girls is the obvious joy these hip-hop artists take in performing and in spreading the word. These are not merely disaffected kids looking for an outlet at any cost; they are true believers in the necessity to find your passion and the ability of every individual to be creative and unique. After the show in Guiyang, which plays out like more of a pilgrimage than a hip-hop performance, Gary expresses that he isn’t so much concerned if the show was a huge success with the majority of people, they’re just hoping to change the life of at least one person. The people who’s life they might have changed are shown in a cut back to the night before, where two young boys, no older than 15, are giddily proclaiming their love for hip-hop and their newfound desire to make it in the world of hip-hop like the artists they just saw. In an earlier scene, a high school student from Urumqi, the capital of the far Western Xinjiang province, describes how he took a 48-hour train to Shanghai just to spend his spring vacation studying with Gary. This is the market the hip-hop devotees have been trying to reach, and it’s through their passion that the message has been spread.

The mainstream appeal of hip-hop seems to be removed from this world, as well, and it has become a uniquely Chinese expression through its adoption by this group. The designer Momo speaks disparagingly about those who dress in hip-hop style but don't understand the deeper meaning behind the music or have anything to do with the hip-hop culture in China that this movement has created. For youths to damage the image of hip-hop in China by not understanding it is the biggest insult because this movement is not the carbon copy of American culture, which mainstream youth might idolize. Instead, this movement, as Gary explains, takes the style of hip-hop and the message behind it, and applies it to a Chinese worldview. The issues they rap about are Chinese, the dances are informed by a Chinese tradition as well as a western one, the graffiti takes an American style and uses it to express Chinese art and beauty. Unlike many other forms of pop culture today, the point of this movement is not how Western it is, but how it expresses a Chinese worldview through a Western medium. The distinction is key, not only for the individual expressiveness of it, but also for the future of Chinese art.

If China wishes to become a global force of soft power, or to just make their mark on the modern global culture, they'll need to focus on what is uniquely theirs, instead of copying and rehashing what is seen as uniquely American or western. The Super Girls are guilty of this because of the lack of individual expression they put into the western art form, the hip-hop artists in *Follow Your Heart* have moved towards creating something uniquely Chinese that can also appeal to those across cultural lines. A similarity these artists share with the Super Girls, however, is also uniquely Chinese. Although these two groups have approached pop culture from very different standpoints, they are both seeking to transform their destinies.

Conclusion

As seen above, the youth culture in China is not homogenous and is marked by many inconsistencies and rapid changes. Such complexities of Chinese urban youth identity reflect the material and cultural conditions of China's dual modernity under "socialism with Chinese characteristics", with its inherent contradictions and hybridity. Youth have to form their modern identities at the intersection of tradition and globalization, and development and consumerism.

There is, of course, no 'right' way to be a modern youth or to experience youth culture, and young adults around the world are having their dreams disappointed, it could be argued that this is a natural part of the aging process. However, there is a dangerous trend in China, as evidenced by the statistics in the second section of this chapter, towards a consumerism that isn't being outgrown and is instead becoming the chief goal of many young people. As seen in the films, this type of infatuation with the consumer culture often leads to young adults feeling adrift if they are unable to attain it, often even if they are unable to attain it, the lack of satisfaction it provides can be deeply disheartening. The only remedy is to seek real fulfillment not through what the culture dictates but through personal expression.

As China becomes more and more present on the global stage, the youth population will find that their culture becomes more and more of a force not only in East Asia but also globally. Their ability to shape global culture will one day surpass their ability to be shaped by it, but if their entire youth culture is a copy of Western culture, there is no longer any power in it. China has the longest history of any modern society to

draw upon for cultural inspiration but their frantic abandonment of this culture in the 20th century has led to a void that has yet to be filled by anything more permanent than a consumer obsessed society. This culture has not been lost however, and if the youth of today are willing to draw upon it when creating the new cultural expressions of today, all of China will be stronger because of it.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

As shown in the chapters above, Chinese documentary film provides the most informative and personal outlet into the lives of the youth in China today and the challenges they are facing. In the past four chapters, I have shown how the effects of sweeping government and societal changes have deeply altered the course of the lives of many young men and women in China, but that it has not necessarily altered their worldview. The young men and boys, particularly those focused on in *Up The Yangtze* and *Please Vote For Me*, would likely still view the world with a certain amount of privilege and rely on their personal connections to help them achieve their goals. The children of the migrant workers seen in *Railroad of Hope* and *Last Train Home*, would likely still face their parents' expectations for improvement of their social situation even if they were able to work closer to home. And all young men and women would still be facing the clash of the promise of prestige with the reality of

So if the historical circumstances haven't fundamentally changed the psyche of the youth in China today, why both to examine it through film? Because the political and social movements have still shaped their lives in terms of economic opportunities, personal freedoms, and social motivations, and if they are understood in combination with the deeply rooted cultural values that direct the actions and mindset of the youth, then the future leaders of China will be better understood. Those ruling China today were born before the PRC was even a fully established country. Hu Jintao, the paramount leader of China for the past ten years, would have lived his formative years under civil

war, then the Communist Revolution, then the Great Leap Forward and other campaigns. He would've been in his twenties during the Cultural Revolution, so the youths who were involved in that campaign haven't yet reached the highest offices in government. It will be several decades before the youth of today are in control of the decisions of the CCP and much can change between now and then, but what won't change are the experiences in their youth that will shape their view of themselves, China, and its place in the world.

The documentary features that are coming out of China today are not only a way to reveal the struggles of those living at the margin or to chronicle a particular event, but show the reality of everyday life for millions of people, that up until very recently, remained a mystery. The films selected were chosen because of the combination of issue they portray and style in which they portray it that allows the viewer to experience the most unaltered moments and get at the deepest realities. Since the advent of digital filmmaking, the directors need nothing more than a handheld camera to begin shooting and therefore are able to plant themselves firmly among those they are filming without appearing too obtrusive. The result is a more intimate and also more real portrait of modern China than almost any other medium can provide. The stories we hear are being told to us directly, yes, but more importantly they're playing out before our eyes, without needing to be said. This combination of word and image is what makes all movies powerful; the reality of it is what makes documentary powerful.

As someone who belongs to the generation that is being studied here, the implications about the youth in China resonate deeply with me not only because of my own interests in Chinese culture and language but because of the likely importance the relationship between the Chinese and Americans of this generation. As China and the

United States begin to emerge more and more as two of the dominant global powers in the 21st century, the level of understanding and sympathy between the two populations seems to be stagnant. The only way for the West to truly understand the path China has taken and the course it is likely now to start is by studying its history and these modern social issues, yes, but also by listening to the voices of those within China. During my time there in 2010, I was astonished not only by what I heard and saw but also by how little I had known or expected to see. The view of many in my generation, even the future leaders of it, is not much more broad and it will need to be. Beyond making trips to China and actually interacting, I have found that documentary film has been the most illuminating source of not only information but also understanding, that is available.

As I finish this thesis, it has become clear that the more I try to understand every intricacy of Chinese modern life, the harder it becomes. China is constantly changing and to correctly gauge the path it's headed on would be impossible. The best way to face this challenge is to have a firm grip of the history and culture, and how that history plays out in the modern era is best seen through documentary film.

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